



Improving Educational Opportunities for Children with Disabilities

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Chairwoman Andrea L. Stillman
Chairman Andrew M. Fleischmann
Education Committee
Room 3100, Legislative Office Building
Hartford, CT 06106

February 20, 2012

RE: SENATE BILL 24: SPECIAL EDUCATION

Dear Madame Chair and Mr. Chair:

SpEdConnecticut, Inc, formerly LDA of Connecticut, Inc, is a non-profit provider of educational advocacy, training, and other services to families and individuals dealing with educational disabilities. A great deal of attention is being given to “closing the achievement gap” in education. Most of the focus has been on the disparities between the achievements of minority urban students and the achievements of white suburban students.

We are writing to bring your attention to another serious achievement gap: the gap between the achievements of students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. This gap is evidenced by recent National Assessment of Educational Progress scores including:

1. On eighth grade standardized math tests, 52% of students with disabilities scored below basic, whereas only 21% of their non-disabled peers scored below basic;
2. On eighth grade reading tests, 45% of students with disabilities scored below basic, whereas only 13% of their non-disabled peers scored below basic.

Educational disabilities do not discriminate on the basis of race or social status, although more wealthy families are better able to advocate for their children and to afford services which help them. As part of Connecticut’s efforts to “close the achievement gap”, steps must be taken to close the gap between students with educational disabilities and their non-disabled peers. It is important to note that educational disabilities do not necessarily render students unable to learn. Rather, students may require support services and/or different forms of instruction to learn and progress along with their non-disabled peers. It is also important to realize that educationally disabled students comprise a disproportionate percentage of youths involved with the juvenile justice system. Several years ago, a survey of students incarcerated at Long Lane found that 80% of the students required special education. Overall, youths in juvenile corrections were four years below their peers in reading and math and the percentage of youth with intellectual disabilities, specific learning disabilities, and emotional disabilities was three-to- five times the percentage in the general population.

Based on our experience, we recommend that the Legislature take the following steps to begin to close the achievement gap for children with educational disabilities:

1. Increase funding for teachers and support staff. Recently, the State Department of

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Education has required that schools adopt Scientific Research-Based Instruction and collect data to measure the progress of all students. This is a very necessary step, but it requires more time to gather and analyze data if it is to be implemented effectively. Without increases in staff, the additional time must be subtracted from time given to instruction. This trade-off cannot be made if the achievement gap is to be closed.

2. Increase funding for training of teachers and support staff to better acquaint them with the tools and practices needed to effectively collect and analyze data in order to effectively monitor the students' progress. Given Connecticut's commitment to include students with educational disabilities in regular education, more training is required for all teachers and staff, not just those directly involved in special education, about how to meet the needs of these students so that they can achieve up to their abilities and close the gap;
3. Although not currently present in the proposed legislation, for the last few years, school districts have recommended the reversal of Connecticut's longstanding requirement that the burden of proof in educational due process hearings be placed on the districts. We expect that this issue will be raised again this year. We request that the Education Committee again reject this attempt to further disadvantage parents who seek appropriate assistance for their educationally handicapped children. Districts accurately claim that placing the burden on the parents to prove that their children are not receiving a free appropriate education will save the districts money. Not only will they save legal fees as fewer parents will be able to successfully bring a complaint, but they also will save money by reducing the services provided to the disabled students. Parents are the most interested parties in the educational progress of their own children. Given the advantages the districts already have in funds for attorneys and witnesses as well as their own staff of experts, placing the burden on parents will further reduce their ability to advocate for their children's educational needs. Less effective advocacy will limit the progress of these students and widen, rather than close, the achievement gap.

As you consider the many education proposals before you this year, please consider the impact on closing the achievement gap between students with educational disabilities and their non-disabled peers.

Thank you for your efforts on behalf of all our children.

Sincerely,

Carrie Berman, President
On behalf of the Board of Directors

Board of Directors

Carrie Berman • Colleen Masse • William Bossi • Judi Bunker • Roger Bunker • Harriet Clark • Mary Hardy • Cindy Kellerstedt • Gerry McMahon

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